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IMPROVEMENTS TO THE OFFICER SELECTION PROCESS

BY

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IMPROVEMENTS TO THE OFFICER SELECTION PROCESS

AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY PROJECT

by

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Centralized selection boards are conducted by the Department of the Army to select officers for promotion, command, school and retention. These boards operate under principles designed to maximize fairness and impartiality. The upcoming personnel reductions, the growth of inflation in the Officer Evaluation Reporting system, and hints of a loss of confidence in the system make a reevaluation of board procedures necessary. Six recommendations are outlined to improve board efficiency and reduce distractors to the process. These include: (1) revise the information provided on the board officer record brief; (2) change the regulations governing official photographs; (3) improve automation support; (4) reduce the population being considered to those who are competitive; (5) increase the authority of the board to accomplish multiple functions; and (6) review files in branch or skill groupings to improve evaluation of potential across the spectrum of differing career tracks. The paper does not offer step-by-step solutions, but attempts to open the dialogue on change.

INTRODUCTION

Colonel Bob Hysong rubbed his eyes, stretched his aching neck muscles, and for the third time that day wondered if he was really doing the right thing. Without doubt this was the hardest task he had ever been given and perhaps the most important. After all, selecting the next generation of Lieutenant Colonels who would lead the Army for the next 10 years was a heavy responsibility. However, he had to review over 300 files each day and even at that pace he would be away from his brigade for more than 30 days. Constantly on his mind was a nagging fear that he wasn't voting consistently. Was he giving more value to assignment patterns today than he did yesterday, deducting more points for non-residence CGSC than when he started, allowing his personal bias towards warfighters sway his decision process when reviewing the files of logisticians? All he could do was plunge onward, hopeful that his errors would be offset by one of the 18 other board members who were in the same boat.

Col Hysong is typical of the more than 850 officers who are called upon each year to perform duties as board members on Department of the Army centralized selection boards which are conducted under the auspices of the Secretariat for Selection Boards. Boards are conducted for many reasons: to select officers and non-commissioned officers for promotion in both the active and reserve components; to reduce the size of the army via reductions in force and selective early retirement; to select battalion and brigade level commanders; and to select officers to attend military schools. Boards can range in duration from a few days to months depending on the number of records that need to be evaluated. Board membership also varies, but most boards are comprised of sufficient membership to give representation to career tracks, duty locations, and ethnic groups. Regardless of duration or membership, every board's deliberations result in the

identification of those leaders who are best qualified for promotion, command, schooling or retention.

The purpose of this project will be to propose changes to the existing officer selection system that could potentially improve the ability of board members to make the right choices. The focus of this paper will be on the active component officer selection process although some suggestions could have an impact on the reserve and enlisted systems as well. Recommended changes range from simple format revisions to new voting procedures. They are the product of the author's intuition and reflection based on a two year assignment as Chief of the Secretariat for Officer Selection Boards and do not reflect extensive scientific research. Before they can be implemented additional study and experimentation is necessary, and some will require changes to the law and regulations.

Why are any changes necessary at all? The current system appears to be working adequately. The performance witnessed in Desert Shield/Storm is a direct reflection of the quality of leadership that has been selected over the years by the centralized process. That we have developed and selected capable, sometimes even inspirational, leaders through our current system is indisputable. However, there are three problems appearing on the horizon that make some change necessary.

First, with a relatively large standing Army there was an excellent probability, regardless of the effectiveness of the

selection process, that the proper mix of leaders would emerge at the right time to provide the strategic level leadership needed.¹

As the Army downsizes and the manpower pool is reduced, the ability of the system to make right choices will become more and more critical. The changes suggested could help by removing some potentially harmful distractors and by improving the file review process used in the board room.

Second, a recent survey of 21,000 soldiers concluded that some erosion in trust in the promotion system has occurred compared to a 1990 survey of a similar population.² Maintaining a high degree of confidence in the fairness and impartiality of the system is critical. Officers currently have a deep and abiding trust that the selection process will provide rewards based on their abilities and demonstrated potential, free from bias and patronage. Perhaps the changes suggested in this study can help reaffirm the fairness of the system.

Thirdly, the most important document used in the selection process, the Officer Evaluation Report (OER), is beginning to lose some of its effectiveness. The existing Officer Evaluation Report (OER), specifically the senior rater profile, is the best tool the Army has ever had to enable centralized boards to identify the best from among the very good.³ The seasoned judgement of senior officers who serve on selection boards, combined with a respected evaluation tool like the senior rater profile, are crucial to the effectiveness of the centralized

process. Unfortunately, senior raters are failing to adequately spread their officers over at least three blocks and are developing non-credible profiles. A 1992 Army Research Institute Survey noted that 53% of the respondents had received a top block rating on their last evaluation.⁴ As the number of non-credible profiles increases, boards will have to rely on other discriminators to rank order the population being considered. Unless a new instrument is developed, or some discipline exerted on the current system, board members will have to take more time with each file, reading comments in more detail and evaluating other factors of an officer's career. Hopefully the proposed changes will help provide board members with more time to make these crucial decisions.

Six proposals are outlined in this report. The first two focus on information provided to the board and could be implemented by changes in policy. The third recommendation addresses a long standing shortcoming in the automation support available to boards and requires a commitment of resources. The last three are the most controversial and would require changes in the law and regulations to implement. The intent of this project is not to offer sweeping changes or complete solutions but to initiate a dialogue from which incremental improvements might grow.

RECOMMENDATION ONE: REVISE THE INFORMATION ON THE ORB

The Officer Record Brief (ORB) is perhaps the principal source of discriminators used by board members. When facing huge stacks of records and limited time for review, board members quickly develop individualized screening techniques to sort the non-competitive from those who deserve a closer look. In some cases, decisions are based solely on data provided on this form without regard to the quality of the rest of the officer's record. The Army has long recognized this tendency and has taken action to ensure that all officers in the zone of consideration are given the opportunity to review their ORB that is seen by the board to make sure only correct information is considered. Additionally, certain information is left blank in an attempt to preclude the ORB from becoming a screening tool and to prevent unfair considerations from entering the process. The deleted elements are: Number of Dependents; Marital status; Spouse Birthplace; and Command Designated Position List (CDPL) selection data. The reasons these elements were selected for deletion are obvious, however there are many other items left unmasked which are even more dangerous as unfair discriminators.

Information concerning basic date of appointment and basic year group can be particularly damaging. Board members are instructed not to give any consideration to previous board actions. However, they quickly break the code on which year groups are "above the zone" or are in their final year of

eligibility for school or command. Pressed for time, and trusting that previous boards did their job correctly, board members often give only cursory consideration to these files. The fact that the data could be erroneous or that an officer could have been given an adjusted year group does not enter the thought process.

As differentiating the files becomes more and more difficult, even perceived quality differences in sources of commission can become discriminators. Information in the ORB blocks labeled "Source of Original Appointment" and "Type of Original Appointment" can become crucial with no basis in reality, particularly at senior grades. Boards should be basing decisions on demonstrated potential and not on their preconceived notions about the quality of Military Academy Graduates and ROTC Distinguished Military Graduates (DMG) over routine ROTC or OCS commissions.

Many other data elements are present on the ORB that do not enter into the decision process and should be deleted, if only to unclutter the form. Items such as "Religion", "Security Data", "Current PPN", "DLAT", "MO/DAYS AFCS", "MO AFS" and others are important to assignment managers and personnel officers but serve no useful function in the board room. Invariably, one or more board members make it a personal crusade to verify all the data on the ORB. Board recorders spend hours trying to ascertain why an officer's security clearance is outdated or why there hasn't been a physical since 1970. In the final analysis, the entire

process would be better served if board members concentrated only on the performance fiche and left records management to the experts.

Likewise, an officer's promotion history should be excluded. The board member only needs to know that an officer is in the zone, not how far or how early. Height and weight data should also be removed from the board ORB because it often conflicts with that information recorded on Officer Evaluation Reports. The officer is responsible for ensuring the OER entry on this data is accurate, and the rater is responsible for attesting to the ability of the officer to physically perform his or her duties. Only that information should be available to the board.

Actions should be initiated at Personnel Command to completely revise the board ORB. The only data elements that should be included on this form are: Name, SSN, Sex, Race category, primary and secondary specialties, military and civilian education, awards, joint status, and assignment history. All other data on the current ORB is either irrelevant to the selection process or can be determined from other sources. This information should be arranged in a format that can be printed in a vertical (portrait) orientation on 8 1/2 by 11 paper. This orientation is important because, unlike the current ORB, the board member can review it as the board file is opened without having to reorient the form. On this newly developed form, there should be enough room to print all critical information in an uncluttered fashion. This will facilitate corrections by the

officer and will allow the board member to more easily scan the form for crucial information.

RECOMMENDATION TWO: CHANGE THE OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPH

After the ORB, the official photograph is most likely to have an unwarranted effect on the selection process. Current regulations require the official photo to be taken in Class A uniform with all permanently awarded decorations properly displayed.⁵ Some board members spend an inordinate amount of time evaluating the photograph and in some cases have been known to vote a file based solely on slovenly appearance or errors in the uniform.

This source of a potentially negative evaluation could be mitigated by changing the required uniform for the official photograph to the Class B version with long sleeved shirt and tie. No other accoutrements should be authorized, to include awards and name tags. This change would accomplish several desired ends:

(1) It would eliminate the current mania for updating photos (or delaying an update) depending on unit of assignment. Many officers rush to get a new photo made if their left shoulder patch can reflect a more desirable unit, such as 82nd Airborne rather than Military Enlistment Processing Command.

(2) It could reduce bias based on combat experience as reflected in awards and decorations.

(3) It would present a better picture of overweight problems.

(4) It would eliminate the gamesmanship involved in taking "the perfect" photo.

(5) It would reduce the workload on photo centers and keep photographers out of the tailoring business.

RECOMMENDATION THREE: UPGRADE AUTOMATION SUPPORT

The automation that supports the board process is woefully inadequate. Efforts have been underway since 1986 to provide a system for direct input of votes by the board member. Unfortunately, initial efforts were directed at developing a radical new approach to the way each file was evaluated and scored. The Selection Board Support System (SBSS) was developed in 1987 to enable each board member to evaluate up to ten different attributes of an officer's file, apply an individualized weight set, and determine an order of merit list (OML) that was unique for each board member. The SBSS process then would rank order the candidates by cumulating the various OML scores, resulting in a board OML. Unfortunately this system was never accepted as a reliable alternative to the classical 1 through 6 scoring procedure even though numerous tests were conducted to prove the superiority of the SBSS methodology.⁶

Beginning in 1990, efforts were redirected to developing an automated system that would alleviate the intense manual effort

involved in tabulating and verifying scores before and after entry into the mainframe processor. The potential for error under the current process is enormous. Errors can be injected into the system at numerous points:

(1) As the recorder interprets votes that have passed through ten thicknesses of paper.

(2) As the recorder adds the scores.

(3) As the total scores are entered into the mainframe.

These errors can only be prevented by triple checking every step of the process, involving the support staff and the board members themselves in a laborious and time-consuming procedure. How accurately this is accomplished is questionable as each succeeding checker tends to accept that the previous step was conducted without error. This method also wastes board members' time and dilutes the focus of the board on its principal mission - to select the best qualified. All of these errors could be avoided with an automation system that could directly capture the board member's vote, eliminating the need for manual math and additional data entry. The full support and capabilities of the automation community in the Total U.S. Army Personnel Command should be focussed on this effort.

**RECOMMENDATION FOUR: ELIMINATE NON-COMPETITIVE OFFICERS
FROM CONSIDERATION**

Current law allows the secretary of the military departments

to convene selection boards to recommend officers for promotion. The law however specifies that "...an officer who has failed of selection for promotion to the next higher grade remains eligible for consideration for promotion to that grade as long as he continues on active duty..."⁷ By Army policy this same criteria is applied to school and command boards resulting in numerous considerations of officers who are not even remotely qualified for promotion, let alone command or school. Placing these officers before successive boards only serves to make board members adopt individualized procedures to screen out the non-competitive files without wasting their valuable time.

Consider the case of an officer non-selected for promotion to Colonel. As a due course officer, initial consideration would have come in the 21st year of service (YOS). If not selected that officer will receive a second consideration with 22 YOS and will continue to remain eligible until mandatory retirement at 28 YOS. This officer would have begun receiving consideration for LTC Level Command during the 16th YOS, or upon selection for promotion to LTC, and would have been given continued consideration until the 20th YOS. A scant few officers who have once failed selection for promotion get selected on the second opportunity. Significantly fewer, if any, get selected on the third or fourth consideration. Likewise, the officer who is not selected to command by the third look (19th YOS) is not truly competitive for command. Even if selected with 20 YOS the officer will not be able to complete two years of command in time

to affect his or her chances in the primary zone of consideration to colonel.

A change to the law for promotions should be pursued that would allow the services to limit the number of considerations each officer is given for selection to the grades of LTC, COL and BG. Similarly, changes to Army policy should be pursued for command and school zones of eligibility to reduce the number of chances each officer is given for selection. Certainly there can be some consensus as to when an officer can be declared "non-competitive". In fact, that status may be as helpful in defining reality to the officer for whom hope springs eternal as it is to the efficiency of the selection process.

At a minimum, the law should be changed to allow the services to make better use of that part of each promotion board report that lists officers considered "Not Fully Qualified". Currently only branch managers are provided this information. Officers may or may not be told they were considered to be not fully qualified for promotion. Any officer who has been deemed "Not Fully Qualified" by two previous selection boards should be eliminated from further consideration. This provision alone would have eliminated approximately 700 officers from consideration by the 1991 Colonel's Board.

Another way to eliminate the truly non-competitive officer from consideration would be to formalize existing military education level discriminators. An officer who has not attained the proper level of schooling, either in residence or by

correspondence, should be ineligible for consideration for selection to the next higher grade. Lieutenant Colonel and Brigadier General Promotion boards historically have not selected anyone who has failed to attain a Military Education Level 4 or 1 respectively. Although the instructions to the board and the Officer Personnel Management System⁸ do not establish this as a selection criteria, it has become one through practice. The time has come to formally announce these educational gates as prerequisites for promotion, at least among the Army Competitive category. Among the other competitive categories (Medical, Chaplain, Legal) a similar argument could be made for the attainment of professional non-military education.

RECOMMENDATION FIVE: EXPAND BOARD AUTHORITY

Boards spend a great deal of time and effort in reviewing the files of officers in the zone of consideration. At the end of the process each board knows, as a collective body, the strengths and weaknesses of that group of officers. This knowledge should be tapped by allowing boards to accomplish more than one function while in session. If the OML produced by a promotion selection board is in fact a true rank ordering of the population being considered, why shouldn't it be used for other career decisions? The Colonels board for example should be able to recommend some non-selected Lieutenant Colonels for early retirement. Officers selected for Colonel from below the zone

should be selected for Senior Service College, as we currently do with the Major below the zone selectees. The top 10% (or some other number) of each branch, including BZ selects, should be offered the opportunity to command without further board action.

If the comments of most promotion board members are to be believed, the order of merit listing they produce is very accurate in identifying the upper and lower 10% of the population. The middle 80% is where most of the board's time is spent in sorting the best from the good. These figures are only approximate and could be refined by a comparison of selects for command, school and early retirement with the results of previous promotion boards. This change would not result in the discontinuation of command and school boards, but would eliminate the best and worst from consideration, freeing the subsequent board to focus on selecting the best of the remainder.

RECOMMENDATION SIX: CONSIDERATION BY BRANCH GROUPINGS

Today's selection boards consistently favor combat arms officers over others when completing the initial vote. There is a definite "halo" effect associated with being a successful battalion S3 or executive officer and later a battalion or brigade commander in the combat arms. The current Army philosophy seems to be that all our future leaders will be selected from among those who are warfighters first, and from among those who are associated with warfighters in divisional

assignments second. Those officers whose career paths take some other route are only promoted via specialty floors that are provided in the board's Memorandum of Instruction.

Skill requirement directives to boards works somewhat for specialties such as Automation (SC 53), Force Development (SC 51), or Comptroller (SC 45). However, the floor methodology doesn't go far enough to correct the overall imbalance among the branches. Consequently, the Adjutant General, Ordnance, Finance, and other non-Combat Arms branches are typically under-represented in board results for promotion and school. With no overt or covert guidance from powers on high, selection boards have gradually moved to a position of penalizing education and experience in specialized fields, viewing these assignments as time away from direct leadership.⁹

The Army's future as an institution does not rest solely on the quality of the combat arms officers we groom to positions of leadership. Those officers who are serving in other branches also have executive skills that are critical to running any large institution.¹⁰ Unless some mechanism is developed to provide equal growth opportunities, without obvious props, the future Army is going to have a difficult time growing a world class comptroller or a premier force developer. The Acquisition Corps (AC) recognized the difficulties in growing a professional corps within the constructs of existing board procedures. Efforts were begun in mid 1991 to create a separate competitive category for AC officers.

The solution to this problem is not simple, particularly since any solution depends on accurate future projections of the Army's officer needs at each grade. In June 1983, the Commander of the Military Personnel Center bemoaned the difficulty of taming the authorization system in an article explaining the new concept of dual specialties. Every officer would not need to have a dual specialty, the General stated,

"...if we could accomplish the following:

- Stabilize the authorizations or make the target hold still.
- Introduce flexibility into the authorizations or make the target easier to hit."

Unfortunately, the situation has only gotten worse since 1983. The current instability facing the Army's force structure obviously only serves to exacerbate the problem. Those who work with the authorization document system readily admit that managing change and forecasting requirements in manpower authorizations is not an exact science even under the best of circumstances. Without this step, determining how many of each type of officer is needed at each grade is impossible and a truly specialty driven education and selection system would be unworkable.

Recognizing the difficulty of quantifying the demand, the next most viable alternative might be to conduct boards with floors and ceilings for every branch and single tracked functional area. The promotion objectives could be based on board population and overall selection rates. In other words the

objective would be to ensure equal selection rates, regardless of Army needs. This solution is flawed in two respects. First, boards would have to "pass over" large numbers of higher quality officers to comply with the branch floors and ceilings. This occurs now to some extent in all boards that have skill requirements, however not on the scale to which it would occur were all branches and functional areas protected by mandatory floors. Secondly, and most importantly, this procedure could promote more officers than the Army needs in a particular skill, creating an assignment problem for officers with narrow specialties.

Perhaps the best that can be achieved in the near term is to conduct boards in phases that focus on related specialties. Under this concept, boards would be configured as is presently the case, with representatives of the 16 basic branches plus reserve and joint representation. Unlike the current procedure, however, records would be provided to the board by groups of skill codes rather than alphabetically. The board (or panel if a multi-panel board) would vote all files in each specialty grouping before moving on to the next group. Prior to each voting session, board members would familiarize themselves with the career patterns of the next branch grouping. The goal would be to reorient the voter to significantly different developmental paths, enabling a more accurate evaluation of potential.

Ideally, this process would overcome much of the bias interjected by today's system in which a board member votes an

Infantry officer's file with excellent reports in tough Divisional jobs and then is immediately faced with evaluating the file of a highly skilled automator who just finished a masters degree and a tour with industry. The two career tracks are not even remotely close. It is unrealistic to expect a beleaguered board member to be able to mentally shift gears and evaluate both officers against a standard yardstick.

This procedure would apply primarily to Army Competitive Category (ACC) promotion boards. Army Medical Department (AMEDD), Chaplain (CH), and Judge Advocate General (JAG) promotion boards are already conducted in separate phases based on skill groupings. ACC command and school boards would also not be affected since they too are provided with very definitive guidelines on specialty mix requirements.

Skill groupings would be difficult to finalize, but any alignment that provides competitive categories which are more compatible by any degree would be an advancement over today's system. One arrangement might see groups such as:

- a Warfighter grouping of Infantry, Armor, Field Artillery, and Special Forces officers;
- a Direct Combat Support grouping of Aviation, Engineer, Signal, Air Defense, and Military Intelligence;
- a Service Support group of Quartermaster, Ordnance, Chemical, Transportation, Adjutant General, Finance;
- a Specialized Skill group of officers with key skills that are not closely aligned with a particular branch, such as

Automation, Band leaders, Force Developers, etc.

Obviously much work needs to be done to refine the groupings and, perhaps more importantly, define the rules on how dual status officers compete. A solution may be to require all officers at some stage to select a competitive arena in which all future selections will be made. Thus officers who have all the tickets for command and advancement in the Infantry can remain in that competitive arena until they choose to focus on their alternate skill. Whether this comes at the grade of Major or Colonel should not be of concern to the personnel assignment system since officers will be utilized in both principal and alternate specialties throughout their careers depending on the needs of the service. Regardless of the details of the system, something needs to be done to level the playing field in the board room and give the board member a chance to pick the best from each career field in comparison to his peers.

CONCLUSIONS

The selection of an organization's leaders is perhaps the most important function it accomplishes. No system of management, no bureaucracy, no set of operating instructions can replace innovative leaders. Only highly qualified and superbly trained leaders can establish a vision, determine the correct actions to take in response to unpredictable stimuli, and provide the role model for others to emulate.

The Army's method for selecting leaders has long relied on the ability of a group of senior officers to subjectively judge each record and to apply a numerical score that measures potential. Realistically, the current system of selecting leaders for promotion, command, school, and separation will continue as it always has. This critical process will continue to be accomplished by overworked officers, relying on inflated evaluation reports and individual value systems lodged in each voter's subconscious mind. The winners will continue to be chosen from among those who were fortunate enough to have survived the system, to have punched the right tickets, and to have enough flexibility to adjust in tough jobs. In essence we will measure the leadership potential of our future leaders by the same yardsticks that were used yesterday.

The question that remains to be answered is whether or not yesterday's system will be as effective as the Army enters the turbulent period of "downsizing". The best leaders may not be so easy to recognize in the near future. As the force stagnates, officers may not be able to gain the experience that previous generations received from frequent reassignments and constant contact with new mentors in different job settings.

Adoption of the recommendations made here may not solve the problems associated with our uncertain future. They might, however, provide boards with the right tools and the right procedures to at least have a fighting chance.

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